



Pic. Kristin Palitza

## Casestudy

# “I HAVE TWO HEALTHY HANDS”

A Group of Men in the Eastern Cape Overcame Gender Stereotypes and Cares for the Sick and Disadvantaged. By Kristin Palitza



**Sonke Gender  
Justice Network**  
HIV/AIDS, Gender Equality, Human Rights





# Sonke Gender Justice Network

HIV/AIDS, Gender Equality, Human Rights

**Johannesburg Office:**

Sable Centre, 16th Floor  
41 De Korte Street  
Braamfontein 2017  
T: +27 11 339 3589  
F: +27 11 339 6503

**Cape Town Office:**

Westminster House, 4th Floor  
122 Longmarket Street  
Cape Town 8001  
T: +27 21 423-7088 ext 209  
F: +27 21 424-5645

**Email address:**

[info@genderjustice.org.za](mailto:info@genderjustice.org.za)

**Web:**

[www.genderjustice.org.za](http://www.genderjustice.org.za)



Patrick Godana: Sonke Eastern Cape project manager

**S**onwabo Qathula puts on his apron and starts peeling a pile of butternuts, while a pot of rice boils on the stove next to him. The 50-year-old is preparing lunch for poor and orphaned children who attend a rural school in the Eastern Cape. When the meal is ready, he dishes out the food and serves it to the boys and girls. Later, he collects the empty plates and washes the dishes.

A man in the kitchen makes for an unusual sight in most places, urban or rural, in South Africa and is often accompanied by snide comments, mocking laughter or a shaking of heads in disapproval – from men as well as from women. Patriarchy remains the widely accepted social norm and gender roles are clearly divided into how men are supposed to act and how women have to behave.

Care giving – for children, the old or the ill - is generally regarded as a “woman’s job”. Men don’t cook, clean, get involved in the upbringing of their children or take care of the sick. They are seen as financial providers of their families and as the heads of households who lay the law. In one rural area in the Eastern Cape, however, all this has started to change.

A group of nine men is working as home-based caregivers with the Siyakhanyisa HIV/AIDS support group in Qumbu, 60 kilometres outside of Mthatha, to make a positive contribution to the welfare of their community. Initially ridiculed for doing work reserved for women, they have quickly become role models and earned respect for their courage to do things differently and take responsibility for the goings-on in their villages.

The men decided to get actively involved in helping others after they learnt about gender stereotypes, understandings of manhood and fatherhood during workshops run by NGO Sonke Gender Justice earlier this year. They now care for people living with HIV, bathe the bedridden, counsel, educate about HIV prevention and transmission, facilitate access to anti-retroviral treatment, refer patients to social services and assist sick persons in writing their will.

They also encourage community members to test for HIV, distribute condoms and help disadvantaged school children with their homework and cook for them.

“In most places in South Africa, gender stereotypes are present and practised,” says Sonke Eastern Cape project manager Patrick Godana. “Men’s and women’s roles in society are divided, and as a result, men are often left out of community initiatives, particularly care and the upbringing of children. Very few men spend time with their children and as a result most men can hardly relate to their children.”

However, there is a steadily growing number of men who have shed stereotypical gender roles – only that many of them prefer to do this behind closed doors and with drawn curtains, says Sonke co-director

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Sonke staff with partners from Siyakhanyisa

*Pic. Kristin Palitza*

Dean Peacock: “It’s not as bad as it seems. More men practise gender equality than we are aware of. But they do it quietly because they fear being ostracised and stigmatised. Gender discrimination is very powerful.”

In South Africa, studies show that women still do ten times more care work than men, says Peacock, but he is convinced that this imbalance is gradually shifting towards a more equal approach to caring and rearing. “It’s not a matter of black and white. Our realities are more complex. There are a few men that have become role models and practice gender equality. Not many, but they are there,” he explains.

Men’s involvement in care and child rearing is becoming increasingly important due to the high HIV/Aids related mortality of women in South Africa. Households are without women, children are left without mothers – and the roles they have played remain unfilled. “That’s why it’s so critical that men, and especially fathers, get more actively involved,” says Peacock.

Since July, Sonke taught men about gender roles in society, encouraged them to take a positive stand against gender-based violence, volunteer for HIV testing, take care of their own and their families’ health and play a more constructive role within their communities.

Now, almost one third of Siyakhanyisa staff, which used to be an exclusively women-run organisation, is male – seven men work as caregivers for the NGO. “Since men got involved in home-based care, we have seen many benefits and a great change of social dynamics in our community. Our aim is to get a half men, half women team,” notes Siyakhanyisa project coordinator Siphokazi Makaula.

She says that, since the men have started to work as carers, their has been a growing demand for the organisation’s services, because most men in rural areas did not like to be cared for by women who are not family members but appreciate the help and support of men from the community. Makaula further says the numbers of people coming for voluntary counselling and testing (VCT) for HIV has increased and children, especially orphans, were better looked after.

“These men are a great example for other men,” she says.

Men caring for others is a relatively new phenomenon in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent. “In African society, it is seen as culturally incorrect to involve men in care. Men are seen as financial providers, while women are [supposed to be] the nurturers of the community,” explains Godana. “Men don’t even take care of their own health. Going to the clinic is regarded as a sign of weakness, of being ‘not man enough’.”

Working on the premise that gender equality results in respect for each other which in turn creates a better society for all, Sonke’s work with men aims to change men’s, and women’s, mindsets around the roles people





Qumbu Eastern Cape

play within their communities. “Care work, for example, is not seen as work that can earn a salary, so men think it’s a waste of time. This shows how difficult it is to be a woman in this country. Their work is considered worthless,” Godana says.

That’s why it is “highly unusual” to have men working as caregivers, he further explains, “but the story of the men from Qumbu shows that men can change. It’s a break-through.”

Men who were previously unemployed and had little to contribute to their families and communities have now become community leaders. “Initially, people were sceptical about men getting involved in care work, but when they saw the positive impact their involvement had on the community, they quickly changed their attitudes,” Godana adds.

The first man to go through Sonke gender training, join the Siyakhanyisa support group and become a caregiver was Qathula. A few years ago, the widower lost his wife to HIV-related illnesses, fell sick shortly thereafter and found out that he, like his wife, was HIV-positive after testing for the virus. He decided to seek help, became a member of the HIV/Aids support group and soon saw an opportunity to not only be helped but help others as well.

Today, Qathula publicly discloses his HIV status and educates others about the virus, the importance of testing and of positive living. For the

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past two years, he was the only man working with Siyakhanyisa, until, by positive example, he managed to convince six others to join the organisation in mid-2008.

"[The training with] Sonke gave me the skills to talk to other men about health and gender," he said. "I now know how to encourage others to think about ways in which we can create a better life for all of us."

Qathula says he initially received derogatory remarks from other men in his community who questioned his manhood because he was doing "women's work". "It was not easy to take such comments, but I was never deterred," he explained. "[After the gender training] I was comfortable enough within myself to challenge gender stereotypes and I got a lot of support from the rest of the home-based care team."

Now, Qathula, who says he used to be a "traditional" man who had not ever done housework in his entire life, does not hesitate to put on an apron to cook, wash dishes and help other women in the kitchen.

Over time, those who used to ridicule him have taken note of the positive impact of his work and started to show him respect. "People's attitudes are changing. I get recognition from the school principal, the chief of my area and many men and women in my community," says Qathula. "Being able to help people makes me proud and that's what keeps me going."

His sentiments are echoed by Mzolisi Nyembezi (31), another of the seven men who work as caregivers for Siyakhanyisa. Nyembezi says he initially doubted care work was for him: "At first, I didn't see why a man has to do this type of work. I also got many derogatory comments. People said I was doing women's work and laughed at me."

But after attending Sonke's One Man Can training and talking to Qathula, Nyembezi changed his mind and saw value in caring for others. "I had just been released from jail and for the first time in my life, I learnt about gender and fatherhood. I always thought it was women's responsibility to take care of children and that men are only sperm donors."

Nyembezi, who has an eight-year-old son, started to play an active role in his child's life. "I don't just give money. I nurture him, give him life skills, show interest in his education," he says. He also changed his attitude about manhood and his relationship to women.

Before being incarcerated, Nyembezi says he used to come home drunk and physically abuse his sister. "I thought this was my right. I understood only now that it's not cool to abuse; that I have two healthy hands, so I don't need women to serve me."

"He realised that what he had done was wrong. He apologised to his sister and started to respect the women in his life," adds Godana.

Nyembezi says he was elated about his new way of life and decided to share his knowledge with others. When caring for ill men, he started

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to talk to them about gender issues. He also got involved in community outreach focused on gender and Aids education. Nyembezi and his fellow male caregivers hand out condoms at local taxi ranks and use this opportunity to speak to men about gender roles, manhood, fidelity and HIV prevention and urge them to get tested for HIV.

That's where Nyembezi met Andile Ngamlana who found out that he is HIV-positive after he suffered from long-term respiratory problems. Ngamlana's girlfriend, who was at that time pregnant with his child, urged him to visit the local health centre and both tested for HIV. "I was [HIV] positive, my girlfriend tested [HIV] negative, but she stuck with me despite the virus and that was a motivation for me," says Ngamlana.

The 25-year-old joined the Siyakhanyisa support group and soon trained as a caregiver. "Initially I was a bit afraid because, as a young man, you don't want to be associated with the virus," he explains. "But then I decided to tell the world that I am positive. That I am living with the virus, but am helping others who are ill."

Ngamlana also attended One Man Can gender training sessions facilitated by Sonke and says the workshops helped him to improve his relationship with his girlfriend. "I learnt better ways of relating to her, to consult, communicate and make decisions together," he explains. "I don't solve conflict with anger and violence anymore, but show love to my girlfriend and daughter. I nurture them."

He says the training sessions changed his understanding of what it means to have a trusting and stable relationship. "I am now aware of the importance of being faithful. Before, I equated love with sex. Now I know that love goes beyond that, that there is more to it than just sex."

Apart from working as a home-based carer, Ngamlana, like Qathula and Nyembezi, assists orphaned and poor children with their homework and cooks them a meal every day after school. "In the beginning, I didn't know a thing about cooking. I am a man, so cooking was never my responsibility," he says. Today, he is proud of the role he plays at the local school and the respect and admiration he gets from the children.

This, he says, helps him to cope with the peer pressure he feels from other young adults in his community who think it is not "cool" for a man like Ngamlana to "behave like a woman". The acknowledgement from those he cares for also helps him to handle the hurtful rejection he experienced when he disclosed his HIV status to his older brother, who lives in Johannesburg and ceased contact with Ngamlana when he heard his brother was infected with the virus.

Together with Qathula and Nyembezi, Ngamlana stands by the sink and discusses the progress each child has made in its homework and what to cook the next day. At the end of the afternoon, they take off their aprons and contently walk home, with smiles on their faces.





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#### **Johannesburg Office**

Sable Centre, 41 De Korte Street, 16th Floor  
PO Box 31166, Braamfontein 2017  
Tel +27 11 339 3589, Fax +27 11 339 6503  
Email [info@genderjustice.org.za](mailto:info@genderjustice.org.za)

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Westminster House, 4th Floor  
122 Longmarket Street, Cape Town 8001  
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